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SUBJECT: IHEC PREPARING FOR MARCH 7 ELECTIONS, BUT SECURITY CONCERNS GROW

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[11](#). (C) Election Commissioners told poloff December 17 that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is working toward national parliamentary elections on March 7, as confirmed in the Presidency Council decree sent December 13, but a recent rise in attacks on IHEC personnel, including one homicide, has shaken the fragile institution's morale. UNAMI SRSG Ad Melkert raised this matter with the Ambassador on December 20. IHEC Deputy Chairperson Amal al-Bayraktar predicted that Iraq would likely conduct out-of-country voting (OCV) in 15 countries, and IHEC awaits responses from the 23 countries invited to host OCV. IHEC Commissioner Sa,ad al-Rawi confirmed that candidate registration would be extended through December 20 to allow more time for political party participation. At a diplomatic brief on December 16, UNAMI confirmed its technical support for IHEC, including assistance with OCV, security planning and election observers. End Summary.

IHEC Forging Ahead, But Security Concerns Grow

[12](#). (C) Bayraktur told poloff that, now that there is a law, the IHEC staff is working long days to design and implement an operational time line that will deliver elections on March [17](#). Bayraktur then paused and conveyed fresh security concerns that have darkened the mood of IHEC personnel. She told poloff that on December 16 a well-liked IHEC employee, was shot near his house by a gun with a silencer, and in the same week the wife and child of another IHEC staff member were kidnapped (Note: Subsequent reports identify the assassination victim as Mr. Ali Mahmud Alwan, Coordinator for Central Iraqi Operations, and Muhamad Sabree Mahmud as the father of the kidnaping victim; both are from Baghdad. End Note.) Neither Bayraktur nor Rawi had a clear opinion on whether these events occurred because the individuals worked at IHEC, or for other reasons. But both emphasized that personnel have been rattled by these threats at IHEC. In a separate conversation, IFES Chief of Party Sean Dunne added that he too has seen how fears about personal safety are negatively impacting the IHEC staff; he conveyed reports that IHEC Chairman Faraj al-Haydari seemed especially shaken by the assassination and kidnapping attempts just days after the "Bloody Tuesday" bombings of December 8.

[13](#). (C) UNAMI SRSG Ad Melkert mentioned IHEC's developing concerns about security to the Ambassador on December 20. Melkert said that because all IHEC personnel are hired on short-term contracts, and not as full-time civil servants, their families are not entitled to death benefits. In the case of the IHEC employee who was assassinated, Melkert learned that his wife and four month old child were left with no compensation from IHEC. The SRSG told the Ambassador that this situation was causing internal discord at IHEC, and that

some IHEC personnel were threatening to go on strike to demand that IHEC employees be hired as civil servants -- a prospect which could slow election preparations as IHEC awaited action by the parliament. The Ambassador assured Melkert that the Embassy would watch this situation closely, and suggested that IHEC seek less cumbersome solutions to staff concerns, such as offering specific death benefits in their contracts.

Out of Country Voting

14. (C) Rawi reported that the nine-person IHEC Board of Commissioners determined that he (a Sunni) and two other Commissioners determined that he (a Sunni) and two other Commissioners, Judge Kasim al-Abodi (Shia) and Sardar Abdul-Karim (Kurd), would form a new three-person committee to head OCV administration. Rawi noted that the committee had just visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 16 and learned that none of the 23 countries invited to host OCV has sent formal responses to the letters sent by MFA in mid-November. Bayraktar and Rawi emphasized to poloff that IHEC will need replies on all MOUs before January 10. The IHEC commissioners estimated that Iraq will likely conduct OCV in 15 countries, as in 2005. Neither of them was sure about which countries, except that they expected Denmark and Malaysia to decline the invitation, and that Syria, Jordan, Turkey Iran and Lebanon would definitely be included. Bayraktar commented that Egypt was unlikely to host OCV because the Government of Egypt "does not want the influence of democracy there."

15. (C) According to the UNAMI Electoral Assistance Team,

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IHEC determined December 19 that it would conduct OCV in up to 16 countries, dependent on their responses to Iraq's invitation to support OCV. The countries selected by IHEC are: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Holland, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, the UAE, the UK, and the United States. UNAMI technical experts told poloff that IHEC plans to administer OCV over a three-day period, from March 5-7, with same-day registration for out of country voters. Under the strong urging of the UNAMI team, IHEC will locate its OCV headquarters in Erbil, at the former site of the Kurdistan Regional Electoral Office (KREO) which was used to administer the Kurdistan Region elections in July.

Candidate Registration Deadline Dec. 20

16. (C) Bayraktar explained that candidate registration would be extended through December 20 to allow time for candidates to register. She said IHEC plans to hold a press conference upon the conclusion of the registration. Though fewer than 2,000 candidates had registered to date, Rawi expressed confidence that parties would register candidates on time, adding that parties have experience from prior elections, and so they understand the process. Rawi and Bayraktar each estimated that about 15,000 candidates were likely to register; their estimates are based on the number of candidates that registered for the 441 seats in the January 2009 provincial elections. (Note: UNAMI is projecting 5,000-8,000 candidates will register overall. End Note.)

UNAMI Diplomatic Briefing

17. (U) At the Iraq Partner's Forum on December 16, the head of UNAMI's Electoral Assistance Team, Sandra Mitchell, provided a short briefing on UNAMI's elections assistance. Mitchell expressed confidence that IHEC would be fully capable of effectively executing the March 7 elections with support from UNAMI and USAID implementing partner IFES. Mitchell added that UNAMI is also providing direct assistance

to the security planning process through the Election Supreme Security Committee (ESSC) headed by LTG Ayden Khalid Qadir, Deputy Minister for Police Affairs and Security, Ministry of the Interior. Mitchell cautioned that administering OCV will be one of the most difficult challenges for IHEC, and explained that UNAMI will lead in assistance in Syria and Iran where USG-funded IFES does not have permission to operate. Mitchell also added that UNAMI plans to field 14 election observer teams for the March national elections.

Comment

18. (C) After the passage of the election law amendments on December 6, IHEC has not missed a beat in planning for elections on the new date of March 7. Currently the focus is on OCV and candidate registration, but with UNAMI and IFES assistance, IHEC will continue to shift priorities as it executes a complex schedule of activities to be undertaken in the coming weeks. Recent violence also introduces a new twist into IHEC's planning; strong leadership and focus will be needed to prevent fears from distracting IHEC personnel. USF-I and the Embassy are working closely with IHEC and UNAMI to ensure that they will be able to continue their dedicated efforts to administer elections in March without interruption.

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